

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1 *Sec 1*

LOS ANGELES TIMES
3 March 1985

'Cowboy' in Control

Contras and CIA: A Plan Gone Awry

By ROBERT C. TOTH
and DOYLE McMANUS,
Times Staff Writers

WASHINGTON—His code name was "Maroni" and he seemed an implausible figure for the fateful role he played. "Too fast and loose for an operations man," says a congressman who knew him then, "a guy for colorful stories and flashy clothes—polyester plaids and mustard colors and loud jackets that made you wonder what race track he'd just come from."

"A cowboy, dumb and dangerous," complains a veteran intelligence officer, using CIA slang for an officer considered too quick on the trigger, faster to act than to think. "A flamboyant guy, ... a salesman, not the ideal man for congressional hearings," acknowledges even one of his admirers.

Yet Dewey "Maroni," a longtime CIA officer whose full name remains protected under federal law, was operations man, congressional hearings man and a great deal more. He was the executive officer chosen by the Reagan Administration four years ago to take charge of Nicaragua's ragtag bands of anti-Sandinista guerrillas and weld them into a secret instrument of U.S. foreign policy.

And today, as President Reagan presses Congress to renew support for the anti-Sandinistas and steps up the pressure on Nicaragua's leftist regime, the story of how Reagan and a handful of senior officials came to set Maroni in motion—and the events that followed—dramatize the contradictory, divisive and at times deceptive way U.S. policy in Central America has evolved.

In meetings in Miami, in "safe-houses" in Honduras and in jungle camps just north of the Nicaraguan border, Maroni and his agents lec-

tured the anti-Sandinista insurgents, known as *contras*, on the principles of guerrilla war and prodded them to show a more attractive political face to Congress and the American public. Eventually, he turned them into a 16,000-man fighting force that would send tremors through the Sandinista regime—all at the bargain-basement price of a dollar a day a man.

'An Impossible Mission'

Indeed, some Reagan Administration officials still marvel at how much he accomplished. "Dewey was given an impossible mission: a checkbook without much in it and the job of making a real insurgency out of a mixed bag of good and bad apples," a State Department official said. "In those terms, it is a success story: a working insurgency with 16,000 men."

Maroni carried out his orders so well, however, and officials in Washington managed U.S. policy so haphazardly, that the action in Central America soon moved ahead of policy guidelines set in the White House. Indeed, action on the ground came to drive the policy, instead of the other way around. Regardless of whether Maroni is considered a hero or a goat, the

program, when it was publicly revealed, would ultimately embarrass the Reagan Administration before the world and sow bitter division at home.

The operation, initially authorized by the President as a low-budget effort to pressure the Sandinistas and forestall a "second Cuba," gradually slipped away from U.S. control. Administration officials for a long time disagreed among themselves on whether the U.S. goal was only to stop the flow of arms from Nicaragua to rebels in El Salvador or to overthrow the Sandinistas in Managua.

In the vacuum that resulted, squabbling but determined guerrilla leaders in Nicaragua's distant jungles pushed ahead with their own agendas while hasty tactical decisions by U.S. officials from Reagan to Maroni as well as by the *contras* turned out to have unforeseen and destructive consequences.

Moreover, the Administration's lack of candor about its goals revived old suspicions and spawned a new wave of mistrust of the CIA among its congressional watchdogs. While the Administration in-

sisted in Washington that its goal was only interdiction of arms shipments through Nicaragua to El Salvador, American officials were telling *contra* leaders that the true goal of U.S. policy was toppling the Sandinistas. And, as Congress became aroused over what many members saw as executive branch duplicity, lawmakers moved increasingly to hobble Administration policy-making in foreign affairs.

Nor has the process ended. The policy launched by a handful of Administration officials, then implemented and later reshaped by Dewey Maroni, continues to exert its powerful allure. The Administration is bent on winning new funding for its now far from secret covert-aid program, and the *contras* now too large a force to be easily sacrificed by Washington, have chalked up just enough suc-

cesses to whet the Administration's appetite for total victory.

As Reagan, who four years ago insisted his only goal was halting the flow of arms to El Salvador's insurgents, put it in a Feb. 20 press conference, U.S. policy today is aimed at making the Sandinistas "say uncle."

□

Maroni, who had carried the nickname Dewey since school days, had an unlikely background for a "cowboy." His education was Ivy League, his accent New England. He looked to some of the *contras* like Walter F. Mondale.

Born in Nashua, N.H., in 1932, Maroni attended the Peddie School in Hightstown, N.J., a prep school then known for sending athletes to Ivy League colleges. There he is best remembered for his athletic skills. "His barbells served Dewey well," says his yearbook.

He had hoped to go to Dartmouth but instead attended Brown, where he majored in American civilization, played freshman football and

was a member of the Vigilance Committee—sophomore athletes who enforced freshman rules. His yearbook refers to Dewey's "table-hopping" in the Delta Phi fraternity.

Maroni aimed next at law school but wound up instead in the Russian Institute at Columbia Univer-

Continued

STAT

city. For his master's degree in international affairs in 1955, he wrote a 112-page thesis on the activities of the World Federation of Trade Unions in Asia after World War II. His paper, accepting the theory that the Soviet Union pursued a strategy of Communist subversion of emerging nations, concluded, "with admittedly inadequate evidence," that Moscow directed the federation.

According to an old State Department Biographic Register, Maroni then went into the Army for two years. At that time, CIA recruits were routinely inducted into the Army as cover and took basic training but then spent the rest of their hitch preparing for a career with the agency. For the next 15 years, Maroni was in U.S. diplomatic missions in India and Turkey, apparently as a CIA operative under cover.

In mid-1981, when Maroni was CIA station chief in Rome, William J. Casey, Reagan's new CIA director, returned from a meeting of station chiefs in Western Europe with a highly favorable impression of him. "He's a real doer, a real take-charge guy," Casey told associates.

About three months later, at the end of August, Maroni arrived in Washington to take over as chief of covert operations in Central America, a post he was to hold until early 1984.

□

When Maroni took over, the U.S. government had already mounted a covert action once against the Sandinistas, who had ousted the rightist government of President Anastasio Somoza in 1979.

The Administration of President Jimmy Carter had grown frustrated that its \$75-million economic aid program to the Nicaraguan government—more than the Somoza government had received in 20 years—had failed to turn the new regime away from Marxism and Cuba. So, in 1980, it had earmarked something approaching \$1 million for secret aid to the anti-Sandinista political center in Nicaragua.

As Adm. Stansfield Turner, then CIA director, is quick to point out, "The Carter Administration had no program of covert action that would have permitted any paramilitary support to the contras." But the fact that Carter had initiated covert activity of any kind made the next step—Reagan's paramilitary operation—more palatable to congressional Democrats.

The focus of American concern in the region, however, was El Salvador, where leftist rebels threatened to topple the fragile new Salvadoran government and create a second Marxist-oriented regime in Central America.

Two Advisers Killed

During Carter's closing days in office, two U.S. land reform advisers in El Salvador were murdered and leftist rebels proclaimed a "final offensive" against the government. In one of his last acts as President, Carter renewed military aid to El Salvador, which he had

cut off on human rights grounds.

When the Reagan Administration took office, Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. wanted to "go to the source"—to take on the Soviets, Cubans and particularly the Nicaraguans who were "organizing, training and arming the (Salvadoran) guerrillas," he wrote in his book, "Caveat."

The White House resisted, however, so Haig ordered Robert C. McFarlane—then State Department counselor and now Reagan's national security adviser—to examine other policy options in Central America.

In preparing his report, "Taking the War to Nicaragua," McFarlane examined the possibility of shooting down small Cuban aircraft, sinking small Cuban boats, smuggling arms and even instituting a naval blockade of Nicaragua and Cuba. But only Haig favored such overt pressure.

"I think Casey might have leaned in my direction," Haig said in an interview. But Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Vice President George Bush and Reagan's closest advisers in the White House were opposed.

2-Way Proposition

Thomas O. Enders, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, went to Nicaragua in August, 1981, to ask the Sandinistas to stop aiding Salvadoran guerrillas and halt their military buildup. In response, he said, the United States would renew economic aid, declare a nonintervention policy in the area and crack down on Nicaraguan exiles training in Florida and California. He sought no internal changes in Nicaragua.

The Sandinistas rejected the proposal, according to a fully knowledgeable source, and "the CIA was

asked by Enders to develop detailed options on the covert side" against Nicaragua.

"The dominant figure pushing to proceed this route was Enders,"

this official added. "More than Casey. But of course, once the decision was made, Casey took center stage."

Casey began that same month to prepare the agency to take on covert tasks by replacing Nestor Sanchez, a 30-year CIA veteran, as the covert operations chief for Central America.

"When the option paper was being pulled together, Sanchez was reluctant to plunge in," one source said.

Casey had been arguing strenuously—and successfully, as measured by budget increases for intelligence—against White House views that the CIA was full of liberals who had lost their taste for covert action, and he did not want the anti-Sandinista covert operations to be headed by someone as unenthusiastic as Sanchez.

So Sanchez was shipped to the Defense Department, where, ironically, he later became one of four officials who oversaw the contra operation. The other three were Enders, Col. Oliver North of the National Security Council staff and Maroni, Sanchez's replacement at the CIA.

For two months following Maroni's arrival in Washington,

through September and October, the National Security Council's Senior Interagency Group on Central America met intensively to examine the options collected by McFarlane. As one possibility after another fell away, Haig became reconciled to covert action.

"In the end, the decision to go covert was a decision almost by default," he said. "It was a failure of the policy-making apparatus."

But Haig insisted that paramilitary support for the contras must be managed by a third party so that the United States could deny responsibility if the operation were exposed. He said he felt exposure was inevitable because the operation would be "too large to hide."

The CIA "went back to the drawing boards," one source said, to scale down the large paramilitary program it had first proposed and to work out a scheme for channeling the U.S. program through, as it would turn out, the Argentines.

That seemed a natural way to manage the third-party cover Haig insisted on. Most contras then were former Somoza National Guardsmen, many of them products of senior staff colleges in Argentina, who had slipped across the Honduran border after the Sandinista revolution. Argentina, whose military junta was vigorously opposed to Communist gains in the Hemisphere, had already been identified as active in training contras in Honduras.

Birth of the Program

Casey met with Argentine Gen. Leopoldo F. Galtieri, then chief of staff and later president, in Washington around Nov. 1. "The two hit it off very well," a source said. "The Argentines said they'd be happy to manage a U.S. interdiction operation with U.S. money, weapons, uniforms." And the program was born.

A few weeks later, President Reagan decided to ask Congress for \$19.95 million to support 500 contras who would infiltrate Nicaragua in four-man squads to interdict arms going to Salvadoran rebels. He signed National Security Decision Directive 17 on Nov. 23 and also signed a "finding" for Congress—a highly classified document describing his decision and the rationale for it.

The secret "finding," along with NSDD 17, was immediately transmitted to both the Senate and House intelligence committees.

In Honduras, the contras were overjoyed by the CIA's green light and the pace of action picked up rapidly on the ground. Miskito Indians rose in insurrection on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast in December after the Sandinistas attempted to relocate some of their villages. Contra units began to attack transports and power stations in Nicaragua in early 1982.

But in Washington, CIA officials met with some opposition when they appeared before closed sessions of the House and Senate intelligence committees in early

December, 1981, to detail the program. Committee members expressed suspicion of Casey generally and of the broad language in the "finding," which did not say arms interdiction was the sole purpose of the operation.

Committee members were also concerned over press reports that conflicted with CIA assurances. Although they were told in Febru-

ary, 1982 that "economic targets" such as agricultural cooperatives were off-limits to the contras, for example, the U.S. press reported contra strikes against cooperatives the following week. And the CIA's explanations were not entirely satisfying.

"We'd have Dewey up for a meeting," a Democratic congressman recalled, "and he'd say, 'We didn't do it. That was another rebel outfit, not ours.' It was always another outfit."

Even CIA officials were uneasy with some of Maroni's activities. They wondered whether the U.S. aim of interdicting the flow of arms to El Salvador could be successfully grafted onto the goal of the contras, who sought the outright overthrow of the Sandinista regime. And they doubted that the CIA could control the half a dozen or more squabbling factions of contras, led by prima donnas of both the far left and the hard right.

In its official line, the Administration constantly proclaimed that its goal was a political settlement in which Nicaragua could keep its Marxist government if it would quit aiding the leftist guerrillas in nearby El Salvador. On the ground in Central America, however, some U.S. officials were at times explicit that the ultimate goal was the overthrow of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua.

Edgar Chamorro, then a contra leader, said CIA officials left no doubt about their real goal. "In private," he said in an interview, "they always told us the objective was to overthrow the government in Managua. . . . They always said

the President of the United States wants you to go to Managua."

Most worrisome to some senior CIA officials were Maroni's negotiations with the former Sandinista hero, Eden Pastora, who was leading an opposition force in Costa Rica on Nicaragua's southern border. Not only was Pastora operating far from the arms-smuggling routes from Nicaragua to El Salvador—the interdiction of which was ostensibly the reason for U.S. involvement with the contras—but his avowed goal was to topple the Nicaraguan government.

"I'll lay odds that Dewey and Eden Pastora discussed overthrow of the Sandinista government," said an intelligence source. "There was nothing going on down there that could be called arms interdiction."

Moreover, only four or five persons in the entire U.S. government knew about Maroni's approaches to Pastora, rather than the 25 or 30 senior American officials who would normally be privy to such sensitive activities, one source said.

"Congress was not told until much later about the contacts with Pastora," said one source. "It is a serious question whether the (intelligence) committees were kept adequately informed," as required by law.

Qualms about such things had no effect on the onrushing train of events in Central America, however.

"No problem," Maroni liked to say. He reported only to Casey throughout, bypassing several senior officers in the intelligence community's chain of command, and he and Casey overrode whatever objections cropped up.

One veteran agency officer said at the time that Maroni saw himself as another Richard M. Helms or William E. Colby. Both had become CIA directors after running spectacular covert operations, in Iran and Vietnam, respectively.

"Dewey's a cowboy right out of the old CIA days," the officer remarked. "You can smell them a mile away."

In the end, however, questions about Maroni are less important than the questions his work raises about the potential for even the most important foreign policy issues to slip out of control.

NEXT: How the United States became entangled in a distant jungle war, with allies it could not control.



Associated Press

William J. Casey